Cocaine suspect claims CIA allowed him to deal

By Tracy Thompson
Staff Writer

His name is Harold Rosenthal — or Humberto, or Mishugana, or Col. Gomez, or sometimes plain old Harold Ross.

He is accused of being the mastermind behind the largest cocaine trafficking ring in the nation's history, cracked last January after a lengthy federal probe dubbed Operation Southern Comfort.

And on Monday, almost seven months to the day after he was indicted along with 29 others, Rosenthal goes on trial in federal court here, surrounded by what may be the tightest security precautions in the courthouse's history.

It promises to be a titillating show for amateur spy buffs, featuring a defense claim that, depending on one's point of view, is either ingenuous or incredible: Rosenthal was indeed a cocaine dealer, but with special dispensation from Uncle Sam because he was a CIA spy.

Among other things, say attorneys for Rosenthal and another key defendant, evidence at the trial will reveal that the CIA engineered a daring escape Rosenthal made in 1981 from a federal prison in Memphis.

Defense attorneys also say that the CIA gave Rosenthal clearance to deal cocaine in exchange for information Rosenthal gave the agency on ties between Colombian Marxist terrorist groups and the Soviet Union, and the supply of arms to those groups — allegedly funded by profits from the cocaine trade.

Those allegations were contained in documents filed under the Classified Information Procedures Act, which requires attorneys to notify the government if evidence likely to be given at a trial might compromise national security.

"Horse manure" was the inelegant characterization given the allegations by one federal prosecutor involved in the Rosenthal case. "Just a fishing expedition (and) smokescreen — the whole maneuver," said the prosecutor, who asked not to be identified.

True or not, the allegations mark the latest chapter in the unlikely saga of the flamboyant former Atlanta bail bondsman who, until his arrest last year, often cruised the streets of Bogota, Colombia, in military garb, surrounded by enough bodyguards to protect a Latin American dictator.

The Jan. 23 indictment that named the defendants alleges that Rosenthal headed a drug ring that smuggled at least five tons of cocaine into this country between September 1981 and January 1984.

With 19 potential defendants (some defendants may be tried separately, and the other 11 persons named in the Rosenthal indictment are still fugitives), this week's trial is expected to be one of the largest ever held in federal court here.

The trial — expected to last anywhere from six weeks to three months — will be the culmination of Operation Southern Comfort, a 18-month-long investigation conducted by the Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force here.

Rosenthal himself was arrested last September by Colombian police and U.S. agents. Armed with Israeli-made Uzi machine guns, they nabbed him as he sat in his car stuck in a traffic jam in Bogota.

Rosenthal has awaited his trial in the Atlanta Federal Penitentiary and even in jail, he has managed to make news. Last February, FBI agents intercepted letters he sent from his cell detailing an escape plan — this time, with the help of $1 million and a team of hired commandos.

That plan was no less flamboyant than the allegations contained in court documents here, filed on behalf of Rosenthal and Philip Anthony Bonadonna, another key defendant in the case.

"U.S. intelligence agencies arranged for Rosenthal to continue his drug trafficking activities in Colombia (as) part of a U.S. intelligence mission to gather vital information on terrorist activities in Colombia," the documents say.

According to defense attorneys, Rosenthal was recruited by the CIA to spy on the M-19s and the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Command of Colombia), two Colombian Marxist terrorist groups.

The data Rosenthal funneled to the CIA, the documents say, included information on the two groups, "the movement of arms to the terrorists from (Soviet bloc) countries, (and) the purchase of arms from those countries by the terrorists with monies gained from cocaine trafficking."

Among the most intriguing allegations is that the CIA engineered Rosenthal's September 1981 escape from a Memphis federal prison, where he was serving a drug conviction sentence. According to federal marshals, Rosenthal made his getaway by simply dressing in a stolen prison employee's suit and strolling past guards out the door.

The documents allege that the CIA arranged the escape through two reputed mobsters with ties to Rosenthal, and that the Drug Enforcement Administration has documents corroborating the CIA's involvement.

"It would be totally improper for us to respond to that," said Ted Swift, a spokesman for the DEA in Washington. DEA officials here also declined to comment, as did CIA spokesmen in McLean, Va.

The documents also allege that while Rosenthal was being held in a federal prison in Miami on a previous drug charge in late 1979 and early 1980, he was instrumental in arranging the release of Peace Corps volunteer Richard Starr, kidnapped by the M-19s.

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In fact, Starr was kidnapped in 1977 by the FARC, not the M-19s, and held in the Colombian jungle for three years until he was finally released in February 1980 for a $250,000 ransom paid by Washington columnist Jack Anderson.

The gist of Rosenthal's story is not corroborated by Jack Mitchell, a former associate of Anderson's responsible for negotiating Starr's release.

Mitchell, now a reporter with Cable News Network in Washington, said he "vaguely" recognized Rosenthal's name, and did call him or his attorneys at several points during the negotiations with the FARC. However, Mitchell said, "that particular contact played no role whatsoever" in Starr's eventual release.

"We were sort of grasping at straws at that point," Mitchell said in an interview last week. "Rosenthal is one of these characters who makes a lot of claims, but only a small percentage of them turn out to be true."